

# 1. Variation and Change I

Introduction to Language (Ling 201)

Prof. Pentangelo

Spring 2026

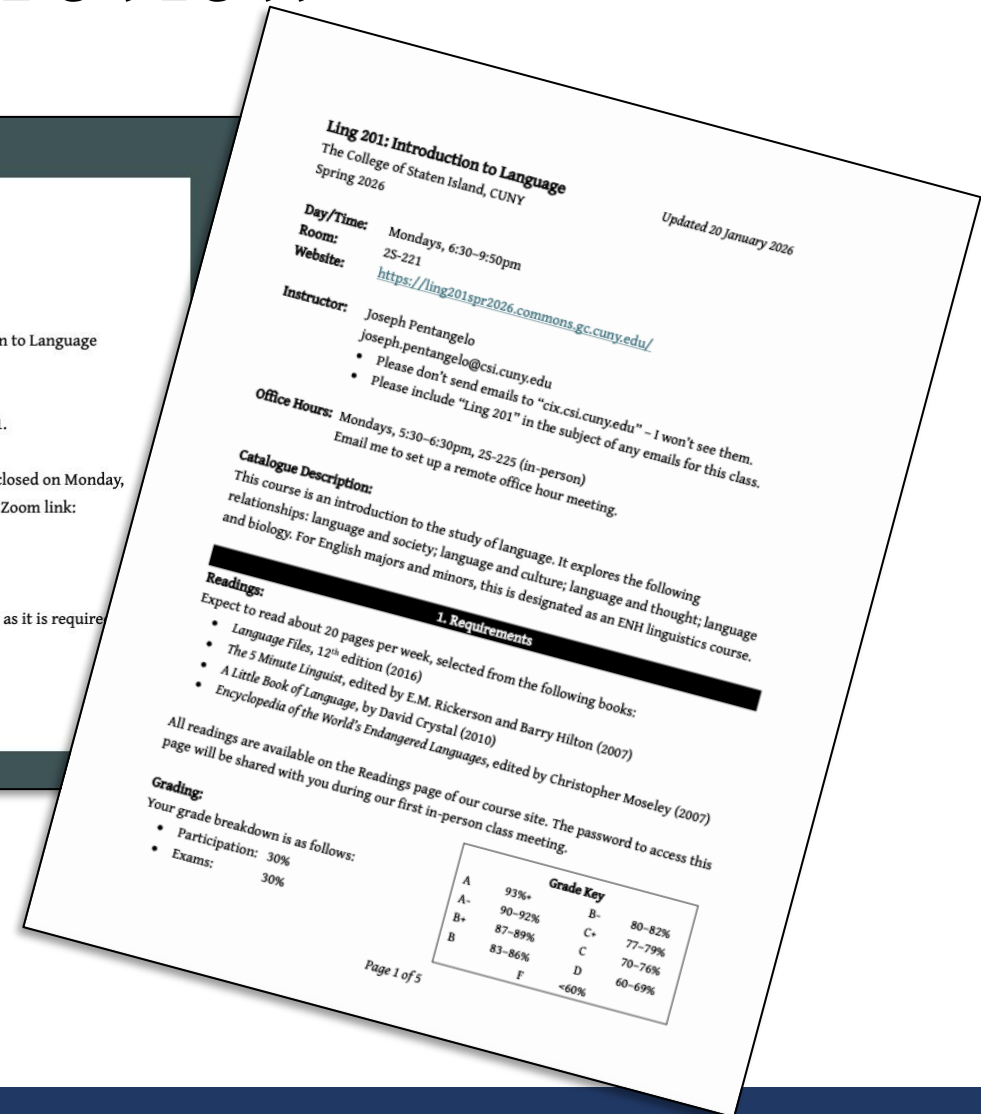
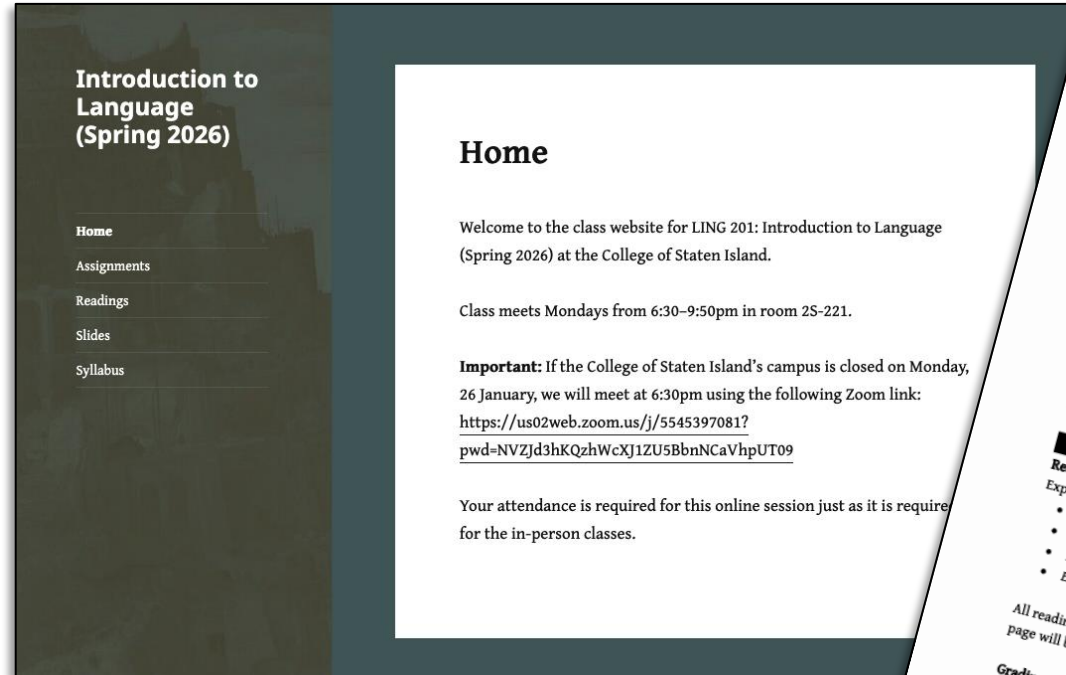
# Introductions



- My name is Joseph Pentangelo. I also go by Joe.
- I am a linguist and a folklorist. You can learn more about my research interests at [josephpentangelo.com](http://josephpentangelo.com)
- I have a PhD in linguistics from the Graduate Center, CUNY.
- I went to the Macaulay Honors College at CSI as an undergrad, class of 2012.
- I live on Staten Island with my wife, Rebecca, our daughter, Elizabeth, and our cat, Babycat.
- I love traveling, gardening, building websites, and hiking, especially in the Greenbelt on SI.

Introduce yourselves: name, major, a little about you.

# Class syllabus + website review



- No slides for these.
- Download the syllabus from our class website: [ling201spr2026.commonscs.cuny.edu](https://ling201spr2026.commonscs.cuny.edu)

# What I'll cover:

This week, we're going to discuss language, and what it says about it in three chapters from *The Five-Minute Linguist*: 1, 2, and 14.

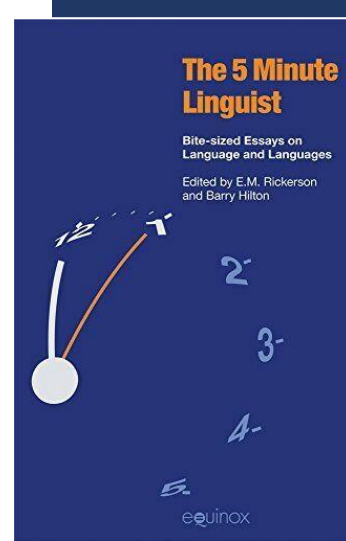
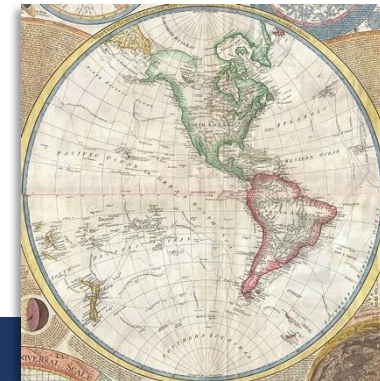
Topics to consider:



What is it that Robert Rodman says, in chapter 1, “makes us human”?

Donna Jo Napoli's chapter (14) centers around identifying and explaining five “well-defined characteristics” of human language. What are they?

Why does M. Paul Lewis say in chapter 2 that it's so tricky to answer the question of how many languages there are?



# What makes us human?

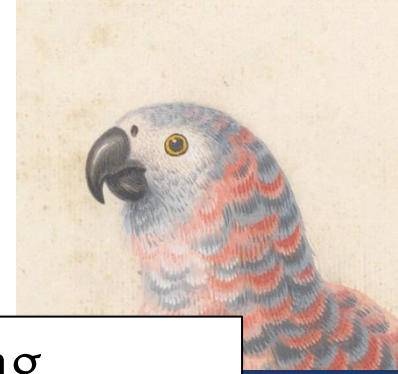
“What is it that makes us human? Is it walking on two legs? Or living in society? Is it our ability to love and hate? To some degree, all of those. But none is unique to the human species. [...] It’s language that distinguishes us from all other creatures.” (Rodman 7)

Other animals “lack the linguistic flexibility of humans—our amazing ability to express new thoughts, without limits on subject matter.” (Rodman 9)



*Guinea Parrot.  
From Lady Wager's Collection  
1740, given  
to Thomas Sloan*

# Human language



“There are two issues here [...] One is whether animals use language among themselves; the other is whether animals can learn human language.” (Napoli 62)

Before diving into these questions, Napoli first gives a five-point list of criteria that identifies what we linguists mean by **language**.

1. First, [languages] are systematic; that is, they all have rules that we call grammar.
  - “Grammar” in linguistics is not quite the same as “grammar” in an English class.
  - Descriptiveness vs. prescriptiveness — linguistics is **descriptive**.

# Human language



2. Human language is also innate. Children are born hard-wired to acquire language. No one needs to teach them.

- “No one needs to teach them.”
- Of course, children do need to *learn* language, but they don’t need to be *taught* language. What’s the difference?
- Language is like walking or eating in many ways.
- The language-related phenomena that *do* need to be taught – like writing, reading, and arbitrary “grammar rules” – are not really part of **language** as we linguists mean it.

# Human language



3. A third striking characteristic is what linguists call ‘displacement’—humans can talk about objects that aren’t present, like the man in this sentence:  
“The weird man you followed last week told me he’s considering writing an exposé of existentialism.”

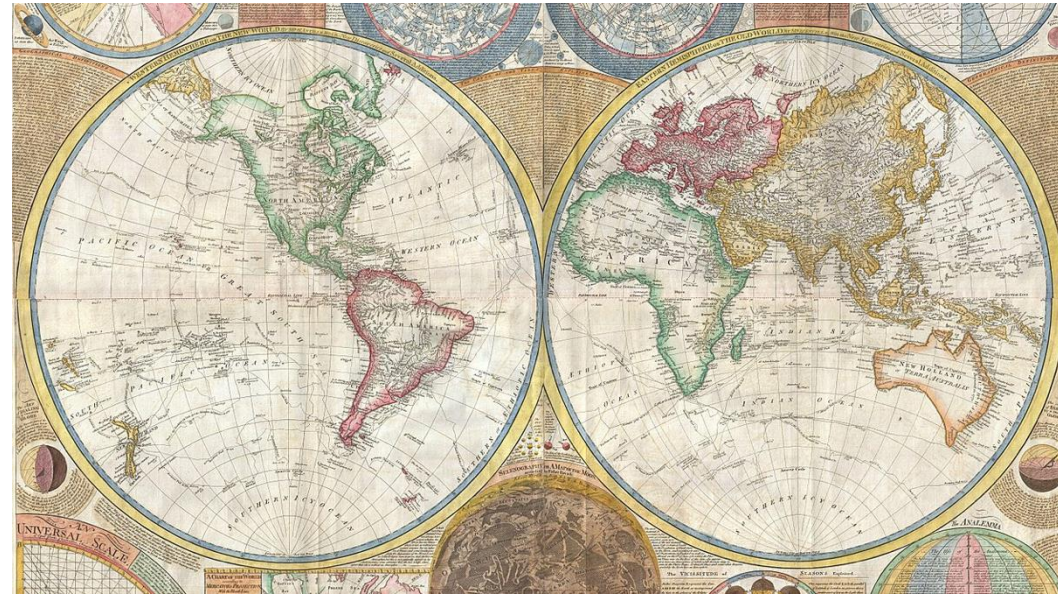
4. Still another feature of language is its ability to talk about abstract notions—like ‘weirdness,’ ‘exposé,’ and ‘existentialism.’

5. All human languages have the ability to create new expressions.

# Human language(s)



- To this point, we've been talking about “human language” as though there is such a thing – almost as though we all speak the same language.
- But do we?
- Who here speaks a language other than English?
- Just how different are the different languages that people speak?
- We'll return to this soon.

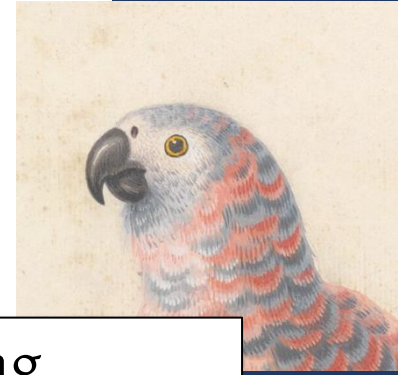


# Communication



- Language  $\neq$  communication
- We communicate with one another in tons of non-linguistic ways.
- Gestures, facial expressions, symbols, gasps, laughter, etc.
- Anyone with a pet can tell you that animals communicate, with each other and with us, *all the time*.
- Lots more examples in Napoli's chapter.

# Human language and animals



“There are two issues here [...] One is whether animals use language among themselves; the other is whether animals can learn human language.” (Napoli 62)

- Napoli gives tons of examples of animals that do *communicate* among themselves, but explains why none of these methods fulfill all five of the criteria that she sets out.
- Many animals can be taught human language to some extent (including both spoken and signed language), but they won't teach it to one another, and they seem not to use it among themselves.

“Language remains the most profound distinction between animals and humans.”  
(Napoli 65)



*Australopithecus*, our ancestor  
from ~3.2MYA

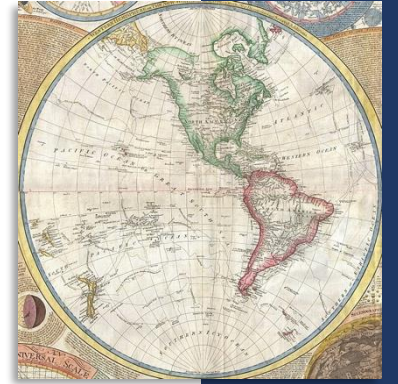
# Discussion!

“It’s language that distinguishes us from all other creatures”  
(Rodman 7)

“Apes and other animals communicate with each other [...] but they lack the linguistic flexibility of humans—our amazing ability to express new thoughts, without limits on subject matter.” (9)

- For the purpose of this discussion, let’s accept this at face value.
- Think back about 200 thousand years ago to the early days of modern humans, and the early days of language. What do you think the turning point might have looked like when our ancestors advanced from mere animal communication to what would be considered language by Rodman and Napoli?

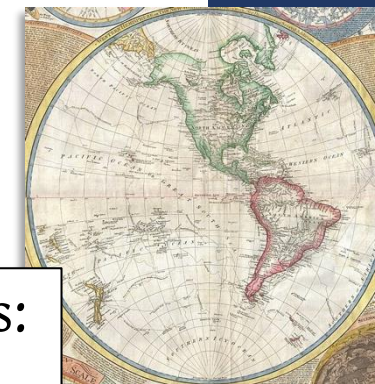
# Languages have hazy borders



- The borders between language and non-linguistic communication is pretty clear.
- Just to use Napoli's first principle: Despite their superficial similarities, signing is not the same as gesturing, because sign languages have grammar. Gestures don't have grammar.
- But the borders *between* languages are often extremely ill-defined.
- Many examples given in Lewis's chapter.

“First, [languages] are systematic; that is, they all have rules that we call grammar.”

# How many languages are there?



“How many languages are there? That’s one of those ‘it all depends’ questions: how you answer it depends on what we call a language, and deciding what is and what isn’t a language is not as easy as you’d think.” (Lewis 11)

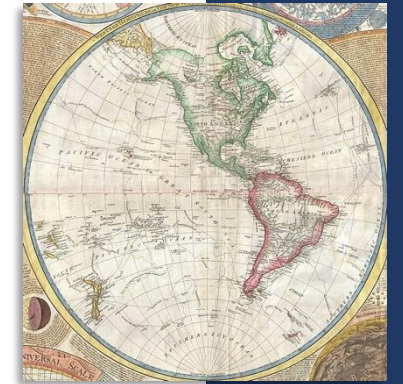
- Does anyone in here speak Arabic?



Arabic-speaking countries shown in green.

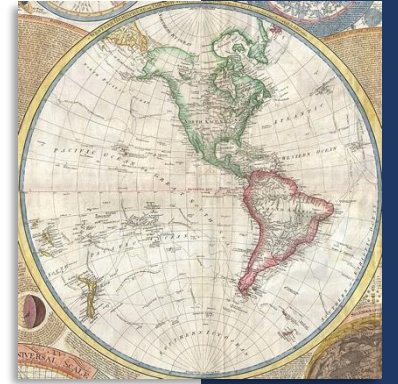
- Which dialect?
- A person who speaks Levantine Arabic usually cannot understand a speaker of Moroccan Arabic.
- So then why do we say both speak “Arabic”?

# Languages have hazy borders



- Does anyone in here speak Croatian, or Serbian, or Montenegrin, or Bosnian?

# Languages have hazy borders

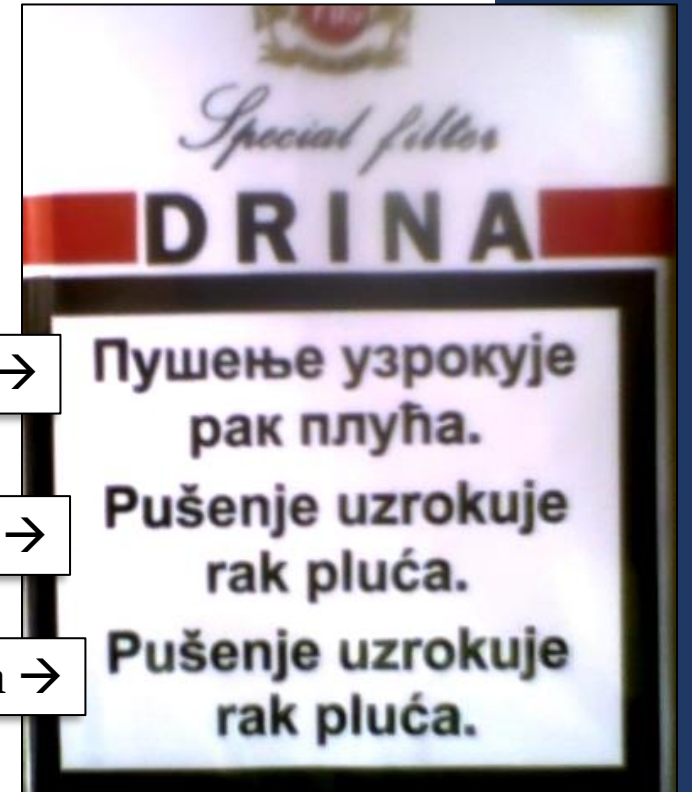


“Serbs and Croats understand each other’s speech perfectly well, but they use two different writing systems. Other groups do just the opposite: A billion people live in China, with at least seven mutually unintelligible forms of regional speech. But they’re reluctant to see themselves as separate nations, so they’ve clung to a unique ancient writing system that can be used anywhere in the country and lets them think of themselves as united by a single language.” (Lewis 12)

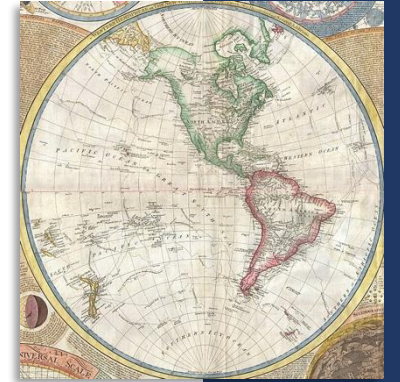
Serbian →

Croatian →

Bosnian →



# Languages have hazy borders

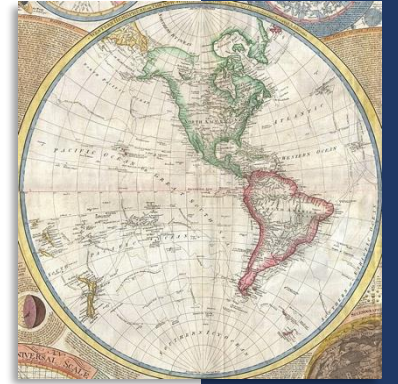


- What's the difference between a dialect and a language?
- What is “mutual intelligibility”?

“A language is a dialect with an army and a navy.” (Popularized by Max Weinreich.)

- What do you think this quote means?

# Languages have hazy borders



- We'll return to these topics throughout the course.
- Over the next couple of weeks, we'll learn more about variation between languages and dialects, and we'll see how this sort of variation is the engine that drives language change itself.
- It's how Latin became Italian, French, Portuguese, Spanish, Romanian, Catalan, etc.

# For next week...

- Read pp.16–19 in *The 5 Minute Linguist* and pp.416–427 in *Language Files*.
- There will be a quiz on these readings at the start of class. Be sure to arrive on-time; quizzes must be submitted by 6:40pm.